

The MA Program on Language Education and Technology: A Global Endeavour

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Abstract

The use of computers in language education has been a fast-growing area of research in the academic field today. Several MA programs are dedicated to this issue and universities are making use of their personnel to cover the many particular topics related to the main theme, although this proves to be practically impossible, as institutions do not usually have the commodity of holding many scholars working in the same area within the same department, school or even institution. The MA program on Language Education and Technology attempted a few novelties in the personnel involved (from 6 different countries), methods of teaching (f2f and synchronous by distance), modules and seminars offered, and transparency of student selection. Data collected did not only involve opinions of those that have attended the course but also results as to how the gained knowledge affected the professional and academic life of the individuals involved. It was found that students appreciated the mode of module development, attended the seminars offered on top of the scheduled program, and made use of the knowledge gained. A number of those pursued an academic career either by being involved in a Ph.D. out of Greece (with a scholarship from the host institution), or as researchers or staff in universities as far as China. Problems during the MA development are also discussed.

Keywords: CALL training, Master programs, Teaching Methods;

1. Introduction

Creating a self-supporting MA program is a difficult task. The main problem lies in the fact that departments do not usually have the commodity of holding more than one expert in highly specific areas. Consequently, several departments typically offer MA courses on general topics and expect the participating students to specialise their knowledge at a final stage, while writing their dissertations. Inviting personnel from other universities is a direction that offers a solution to the problem. However, this involves another difficulty, i.e. the geographical location these individuals are located and transferability. This is where new technologies could be employed and assist with synchronous communication hybrid classes, such as those in Big Blue Button, which was the tool selected to deliver the task.

The problem of lack of personnel and the computer potential bond well under the *Blended Learning* (BL) methodology, which facilitates “a convergence between face-to-face and technology-mediated learning environments” (Naaj, Nachouki and Ankit, 2012). Most scholars (Garnham and Kaleta, 2002; Li and Jianhua, 2004; Chan, 2008; Badawi, 2009; Naaj, Nachouki and Ankit, 2012) would agree that in such environments a chunk of the learning material and the teaching procedures are not provided in the traditional face-to-face instruction.

This study evaluates a postgraduate course on technology in language teaching, by recording the participant's views through a questionnaire aiming to register any possible impact on their professional and academic life, locate its strengths and weaknesses and find whether initial personal targets were achieved. The outcomes of the study are of value to both MA course organisers and MA students alike, with a set of criteria to use for course selection. Initially, a short presentation of the details of blended learning and the program is provided. At a second stage, the particulars of the method selected is presented and collected data is analysed statistically. Major outcomes are recorded and discussed in the last section.

2. Blended Learning

Bonk and Graham (2006) argue that BL combines different teaching methods, approaches and information technology under a new pedagogical environment, while Glbahar k Madran (2009) and Picciano (2006), further suggest that BL combines the potential of technologies with traditional teaching techniques. Delialioglu k Yildirim (2007) focus on the systematic usage and strategic engagement of the electronic devices for achieving the teaching targets and individual goals. Li and Jianhua (2004),



and Garrison and Kanuka (2004) say that effectiveness of traditional teaching is increased in BL environments.

BL inevitably links to learner autonomy, learner needs and tailored learning in which, the individual needs are met through increased and self paced participation (Thorne 2003). In addition, So and Brush (2008) concentrate on the increase of self-motivation, self management and self regulated learning while Driscoll (2002), adds the contribution to the concept of the different pedagogical models (constructivism, behaviorism and cognitivism). Finally, Singh (2001) proclaims the use of the 'right' learning technologies in association to the 'right' skills, time and personal learning style.

3. The program

The MA program attempted to bring together several scholars from around the world to contribute to this endeavour by making use of current technology and fulfill the education needs of language teaching professionals who were either full-time employees, mid-career professionals or students with specialized goals pursuing an academic career. The course was offered through an alternative mode of delivery, such as online instruction, alternatively-scheduled classes, e.g. during evenings for those who worked in the morning and at early morning hours for those who worked in the private sector or during the weekend in alternative locations (e.g. on and off-campus, face to face or virtual). The program attempted to move along two basic strands in language education and technology: a) the academic, for those pursuing an academic career, and b) the practical, for those working as language teachers. The modules were carefully chosen to support the above rationale and were distributed equally throughout the curriculum: experimental research methods and statistics, theories of second language acquisition, mobile assisted language learning, the internet and language education, internet technologies, language teaching theories and CALL, learner autonomy, instructive vs incidental learning and massive on-line language courses.

4. Method

4.1 Design and Procedure

Participants were approached by email and were asked to fill in a questionnaire relevant to the purpose of the study, with a student acting as a mediator to ensure anonymity.

4.2 Subjects and Apparatus and Materials

50 students were initially targeted; 6 of those had not completed the program at the time of the study and were excluded from the sample. A final sample of 44 subjects were approached and 20 of those responded to the appeal (return rate at 45.4%). A questionnaire with 13 open-ended questions was administered and the SPSS (v.25) statistical package was employed for data analysis.

5. Analysis

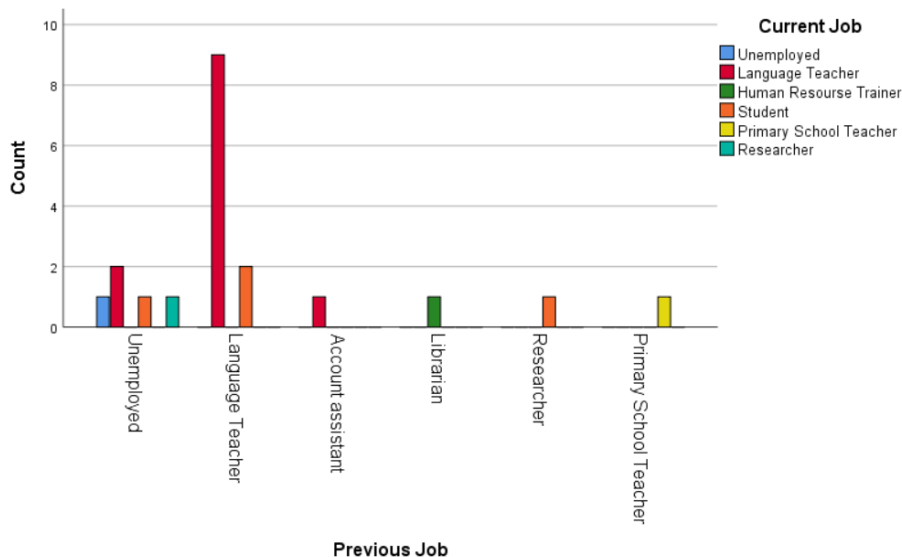
The frequencies are initially offered. These are without the missing items, indicated as *valid percent* in the relevant tables.

5.1 Frequencies related to MA impact on students' professional life

Most participants (11-55%) were in the language teaching profession and a considerable number were unemployed (5-25%). Other occupations, such as account assistant, librarian, researcher, and primary school teacher were represented by only one subject. The Ba-Chart (1), records the employment before and after the program.



Bar-Chart 1.



The impact of the program on the subjects' professional life was considerable as only 1 subject remained unemployed. 2 of those previously unemployed became language teachers, 2 continued for a Ph.D. study and 1 became a researcher. 1 subject changed occupation and became a language teacher (previously an account assistant), while 1 subject remained a language teacher but found a better paid job in China (and also started a Ph.D. study). The rest remained in their previous professions. These claimed that they had learned innovative methods and approaches to language teaching (31,3%), while 4 (25%) specifically stated that they found a better teaching job and 1 (6.3%) that had a salary raise (probably working in the public sector, where the possession of an MA is granted a certain salary raise). Others used their degree to pursue a further study (2-12,5%) and 3 (18,8%) to apply research in their professional environment. There were 4 (20%) missing items.

5.2 Impact of program to students' academic life.

In total, 6 (30%) of the subjects in this sample, continued a further study either at a Ph.D. level (3) or with another MA program (3), while 17 (85%) claimed that the program has added to their professional development. Table (1) below presents exactly how.

Table 1.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Increased Research Awareness	2	10,0	14,3	14,3
	Participated in Conferences	3	15,0	21,4	35,7
	Ph.D.	7	35,0	50,0	85,7
	Self Development	2	10,0	14,3	100,0
	Total	14	70,0	100,0	
Missing	999,00	6	30,0		
Total		20	100,0		

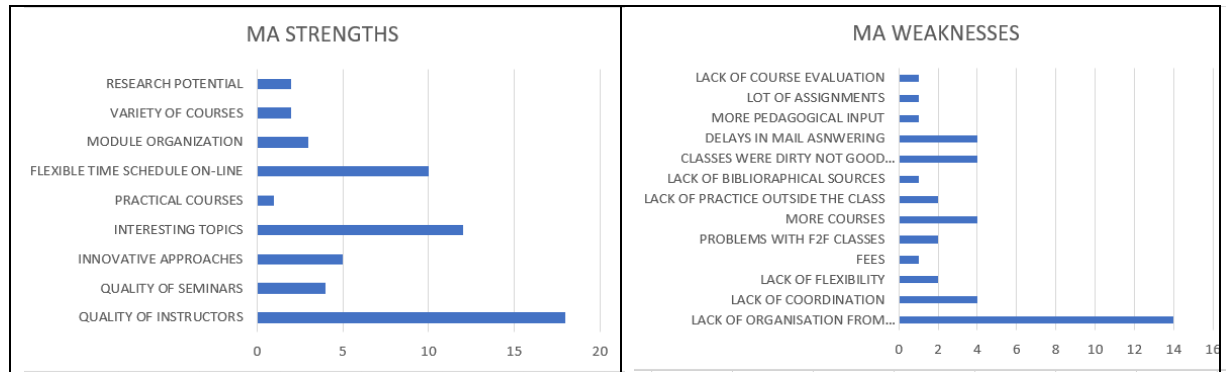
14 (70%) stated that the program assisted to their academic development by a) increasing their research awareness (2-14,3%), b) participation and presentation in conferences out of Greece (21,4%), c) pursuing a Ph.D. study (50%), and d) self development (14,3%). There were (6-30%) missing items.



5.3 Strengths and weaknesses of the program.

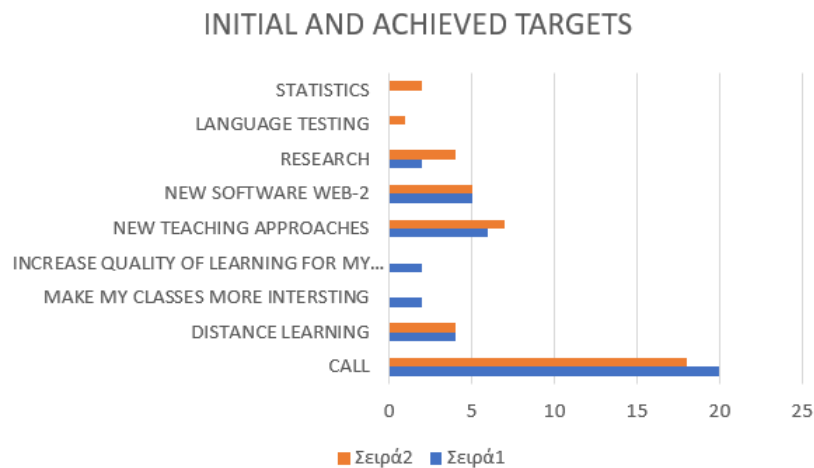
The claimed strengths and weaknesses of the program are presented in the following tables, (2) and (3).

Tables 2 and 3.



Most subjects wrote that the instructors' quality came first in their choice, followed by the topics taught and the time of the meetings. The innovative approach of program delivery, the quality of the seminars and the modules organization followed. The administrator's poor organization (secretary) received most negative opinions. Much less, received the lack of coordination in the timetable between modules (which presented a genuine difficulty due to time difference and duties of personnel, the lack of more courses on different topics, the status of the infrastructure and cleanliness of the classrooms on campus, and the delays in mail answering by the instructors. Finally, personal targets prior to program engagement and targets achieved upon program completion are recorded in Bar Chart (2).

Bar Chart 2.



The claimed personal targets of the subjects rested clearly in CALL. Those were achieved. The same is witnessed with the learning of new teaching approaches, the enlargement of knowledge about web2 applications and familiarity with distance learning. On the other hand, the initial registered wish to increase quality of their classes and make them more interesting, remained unsatisfied. Knowledge on research methodology, language testing and statistics was an unexpected to them gain which seemed to have been appreciated.

6. Summary and Conclusions

The program was declared to have a significant impact on participants' both professional and academic life. It either offered job opportunities to those unemployed or led those interested to a further Ph.D. level study. Those already in the profession initially targeted to learn about CALL, net

applications for language teaching or applications for the design and creation of their own material. These wishes were met.

The claimed strengths of the program were: the instructors' academic quality, the topics taught and the flexibility of the time schedule, the innovative approach of program delivery and the quality of seminars. On the other hand, the administration by the department was stated to be poor. Lack of class coordination as to the times of face-to-face meetings was declared to be lacking. A considerable number of participants also stated that they would have preferred more courses offered and spotted the problem of class cleanliness of the infrastructure.

Most subjects declared they chose to attend the program to learn more about CALL, others to learn more about distance learning, new teaching approaches, and new net applications. The stated targets were mostly achieved while other stated targets, such as making their classes more interesting or increasing the quality of their teaching/learning were not met. Finally, achieved skills that were not initially targeted were, knowledge of research methods and statistics and language testing.

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